

Jorge Luis Borges

The Sect of the Phoenix

Those who write that the sect of the Phoenix originated in Heliopolis, and make it derive from the religious restoration which followed the death of the reformer Amenhotep IV, cite texts by Herodotus, Tacitus, and inscriptions from the Egyptian monuments; but they ignore, or try to ignore, the fact that the denomination of the sect by the name of Phoenix is not prior to Rabanus Maurus, and that the most ancient sources (the Saturnalia, or Flavius Josephus, let us say) speak only of the People of Custom or the People of the Secret. Gregorovius had already observed, in the Conventicles of Ferrara, that any mention of the Phoenix was extremely rare in oral language. In Geneva, I have spoken to artisans who did not understand me when I asked if they were men of the Phoenix, but who admitted, in the next breath, that they were men of the Secret. Unless I am mistaken, the same phenomenon is observable among the Buddhists: the name by which they are known to the world is not the same as the one they themselves pronounce.

Miklosic, in an overly famous page, has compared the sectarians of the Phoenix with the gypsies. In Chile and in Hungary there are sectarians of the Phoenix and there are also gypsies; beyond their ubiquity, they have very little in common. The gypsies are horsedealers, tinkers, smiths, and fortune tellers; the sectarians tend to practice the liberal professions successfully. The gypsies are of a certain definite physical type, and they speak - or used to speak secret language; the sectarians are indistinguishable from the rest of the world: the proof of it is that they have not suffered persecutions. Gypsies are picturesque and inspire bad poets. Narrative verse, colored lithographs, and boleros pay no heed to the sectarians . . . Martin Buber declares that Jews are essentially pathetic; not all sectarians are, and some of them despise pathos; this public and notorious fact suffices to refute the vulgar error (absurdly defended by Urmann) which sees in the Phoenix a derivative of Israel. People think more or less as follows: Urmann was a sensitive man; Urmann was a Jew; Urmann associated with the sectarians in the ghetto at Prague; the affinity felt by Urmann serves to prove a fact. I can not in good faith agree with this judgment. The fact that sectarians in a Jewish environment should resemble Jews does not prove anything; the undeniable fact is that they resemble, like Hazlitt's infinite Shakespeare, all the men in the world. They are everything to all men, like the Apostle. Only a short time ago Doctor Juan Francisco Amaro, of Paysandu, marveled at the ease with which they became Spanish-Americans.

I have mentioned that the history of the sect does not record persecutions. Still, since there is no human group which does not include partisans of the Phoenix, it is also true that there has never been a persecution which they have not suffered or a reprisal they have not carried out. Their blood has been spilled, through the centuries, under opposing enemy flags, in the wars of the West and in the remote battles of Asia. It has availed them little to identify themselves with all the nations of the earth.

Lacking a sacred book to unify them as the Scripture does Israel, lacking a common memory, lacking that other social memory which is language, scattered across the face of the earth, differing in color

and features, only one thing - the Secret - unites them and will unite them until the end of time. Once upon a time, in addition to the Secret, there was a legend (and perhaps also a cosmogonic myth), but the superficial men of the Phoenix have forgotten it, and today they conserve only the obscure tradition of some cosmic punishment: of a punishment, or a pact, or a privilege, for the versions differ, and they scarcely hint at the verdict of a God who grants eternity to a race of men if they will only carry out a certain rite, generation after generation. I have compared the testimony of travelers, I have conversed with patriarchs and theologians; and I can testify that the performance of the rite is the only religious practice observed by the sectarians. The rite itself constitutes the Secret. And the Secret, as I have already indicated, is transmitted from generation to generation; but usage does not favor mothers teaching it to their sons, nor is it transmitted by priests. Initiation into the mystery is the task of individuals of the lowest order. A slave, a leper, a beggar plays the role of mystagogue. A child can indoctrinate another child. In itself the act is trivial, momentary, and does not require description. The necessary materials are cork, wax, or gum arabic. (In the liturgy there is mention of silt; this, too, is often used.) There are no temples specially dedicated to the celebration of this cult; a ruin, a cellar, an entrance way are considered propitious sites. The Secret is sacred, but it is also somewhat ridiculous. The practice of the mystery is furtive and even clandestine, and its adepts do not speak about it. There are no respectable words to describe it, but it is understood that all words refer to it, or better, that they inevitably allude to it, and thus, in dialogue with initiates, when I have prattled about anything at all, they have smiled enigmatically or taken offense, for they have felt that I touched upon the Secret. In Germanic literature there are poems written by sectarians, whose nominal theme is the sea, say, or the evening twilight; but they are, I can hear someone say, in some measure symbols of the Secret.

As stated by Du Cange in his Glossary, by way of apocryphal proverb, *Orbis terrarum est speculum Ludi*. A kind of sacred horror prevents some of the faithful from practicing the extremely simple ritual; the others despise them for it, but they despise themselves even more. On the other hand, those sectarians who deliberately renounce the Custom and manage to engage in direct communication with the divinity enjoy a large measure of credit. To make this commerce manifest, these latter sectarians have recourse to figures from the liturgy; thus John of the Rood wrote:

May the Nine Firmaments know that God Is as delightful as cork or muck.

I have enjoyed the friendship of devotees of the Phoenix on three continents; it seems clear to me that at first the Secret struck them as something paltry, distressing, vulgar and (what is even stranger) incredible. They could not reconcile themselves to the fact that their ancestors had lowered themselves to such conduct. The odd thing is that the Secret has not been lost long ago; despite the vicissitudes of the world, despite wars and exoduses, it extends, in its tremendous fashion, to all the faithful. One commentator has not hesitated to assert that it is already instinctive.